

Writing *Is* a Process

As you advance in college and in your career as a writer, it will become more obvious to you that academic writing, rather than just a product, is actually a *process* that begins when you start thinking about a topic and ends when you finish a final draft. The more experienced you are as a writer, the more you will begin to understand that effective writing is really *rewriting* and that there is no such thing as a “perfect paper”; even strong drafts can be improved by adding, deleting, and rearranging text.

The steps of the writing process:

Planning and Shaping. In the planning and shaping stage, you gather ideas and start thinking about a focused topic for your writing and ways to organize your piece. You establish a purpose, the motivating force behind what you’ve been assigned to write, for your assignment (are you writing informatively or persuasively?), and you begin to consider your audience, the person / people for whom you’re writing. In this stage, you also should pay attention to the assignment’s special requirements, like its due date and required length. If you’re searching for ideas for what to write about, here are some techniques you can utilize:

freewriting. When you freewrite, you write down anything that comes into your mind, on a variety of topics, without worrying about spelling and grammar or how good your ideas are. Don’t stop to censor yourself. Freewriting is used as a tool to allow your thoughts to emerge as you are physically writing. You may be surprised at what you discover!

Here’s an example of what freewriting may look like:

So I’ve been asked to sit here and write so I can come up with an idea for my essay, but I don’t really want to. I don’t know what to write about and the teacher hasn’t given us a specific topic. I wish she would have just told us what to write our paper on, like they did in high school. In high school, they always asked us to write about what we did over summer vacation. I wish this was that easy! Last year for our summer vacation our family went to Niagara Falls, the Canadian side, we had such a great time. So if I was in high school, that’s what I’d write about. My vacation. My family had such a great time! But I remember that I was irritated because everyone seemed to treat us like we were from a

foreign country, which I guess technically we were because we were from the United States. But people seemed to think that just because we're Japanese, our family must be from Japan and must not speak English very well, if at all. If they even knew we were from Japan, they might have thought China or another Asian country. We all look the same, right? That's what they think...not all of them, but some of them. At one point, instead of asking me to take her picture, a woman just pointed at her camera and then at me, like she didn't think I'd understand if she spoke out loud. And I know she was American, I heard her talking to her husband in English! I didn't like that, but you know what? I took her picture. That always bothers me about myself, sometimes I don't think I stand up to stereotypes—instead I think I hide behind them.

brainstorming / focused freewriting. Brainstorming is a more focused form of freewriting. You're still writing ideas down, but this time you're listing everything you can think of about one certain topic. After you've brainstormed, see if you can find patterns in your ideas and ways to organize them.

asking / answering questions. Asking questions and answering them is another effective way of expanding on your topic. Ask yourself these questions about your topic: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

clustering. Also known as *mapping*, clustering is closely related to brainstorming. In the middle of a sheet of paper, write down your topic and circle it. Then, moving out from the center, use circles and lines to record your ideas, subdividing and adding details.

Outlining and Drafting. In the drafting stage, you begin organizing your thoughts and ideas into sentences and paragraphs. But before you start drafting, doing an outline might help you structure your essay. Outlines can serve as a “roadmap” for your draft and can help you see how to arrange things and pull your ideas together. In your first draft, spelling, grammar, and sophistication of language are not important; just keep writing. You can worry about sentence structure and organization later, when you revise.

Revising, Editing, and Proofreading. Contrary to popular belief, these words do not all mean the same thing. Revision involves evaluating your draft and then adding, moving, replacing, and cutting material, and even rewriting whole sections of your essay. After you've revised your paper, it's time to edit it. When you edit, you are checking your paper for grammar, usage, spelling, punctuation,

and mechanics errors. And when you proofread, you're looking for "typos" in your paper to ensure that the draft you hand in is as clean as possible. The following checklists should be helpful when you begin to revise and edit your paper:

Revision Checklist

(from *Quick Access* by Lynn Quitman Troyka)

- ✓ Is your essay topic suitable and sufficiently narrow?
- ✓ Does your thesis statement communicate your topic, focus, and purpose?
- ✓ Does your essay show awareness of your audience?
- ✓ Is your essay arranged effectively?
- ✓ Have you checked for material that strays from your topic?
- ✓ Does your introduction prepare your reader for the rest of the essay?
- ✓ Do your body paragraphs express main ideas in topic sentences as needed? Are your main ideas clearly related to your thesis statement?
- ✓ Do your body paragraphs provide concrete support for each idea?
- ✓ Do you use transitions and other techniques to connect ideas within and between paragraphs?
- ✓ Does your conclusion give your essay a sense of completion?
- ✓ Have you eliminated sentence fragments, comma splices, and fused sentences?
- ✓ Have you eliminated confusing shifts?
- ✓ Have you eliminated disjointed sentences?
- ✓ Have you eliminated misplaced and dangling modifiers?
- ✓ Are your sentences concise?
- ✓ Do your sentences show clear relationships among ideas?
- ✓ Have you used exact words?
- ✓ Is your usage correct and your language appropriate?

Editing Checklist

(from *Quick Access*)

- ✓ Is the grammar correct?
- ✓ Are the sentences correct?
- ✓ Are commas used correctly?
- ✓ Is all other punctuation (other punctuation marks, hyphens, capital letters, italics, etc.) used correctly?
- ✓ Are all words spelled correctly?

Composing Your Essay

So you know what your purpose is; you know who your audience is; you've organized your thinking on paper; you're ready to start writing. But you're not sure exactly where to start....

Composing a thesis. Before you can begin writing, you need to have a *thesis statement*. The goals of a strong thesis are: to state the essay's subject and purpose; to establish the writer's point of view toward the subject; to make a statement that leads to main ideas and supporting details; and to use specific language and avoid vagueness. The thesis is essentially the *central message* of the essay, the point you want to get across in your paper. Everything else in your paper should relate back to your thesis. In order to develop a thesis, you can begin by writing a simple statement that makes an assertion about your topic and your position on it; this will help focus your thinking as your thesis continues to develop. Usually, the thesis statement will appear in the last sentence or two of your introductory paragraph.

Composing paragraphs. A paragraph is a collection of sentences that, together, develop a single unit of thought. Paragraphing is helpful because it enables you to divide your essay into manageable parts that can later be arranged in a unified whole. Using transitional words and expressions will help you connect your ideas within, and between, paragraphs. Here are some examples of transitional words and phrases, and when it is appropriate to use them:

- ✓ When you want to express **addition**: in addition, too, also, besides, moreover, furthermore
- ✓ When you want to express **comparison**: likewise, similarly
- ✓ When you want to express **concession**: granted, of course, naturally
- ✓ When you want to express **contrast**: however, instead, otherwise, nevertheless, still

- ✓ When you want to express **emphasis**: of course, indeed, certainly
- ✓ When you want to express **example**: for example, for instance, specifically
- ✓ When you want to express **result**: consequently, hence, therefore, thus
- ✓ When you want to express **summary**: in conclusion, finally, in summary

introductory paragraph. Your introductory paragraph serves several functions in your essay. It gives background information on your topic, thus preparing the reader for what lies ahead, and it should be designed in such a way that the reader becomes interested and wants to read on. Some strategies that may help you write an introductory paragraph include:

- providing any relevant background information about your topic.
- relaying a short, attention-grabbing anecdote that pertains to your topic.
- giving relevant (or surprising) statistics about your topic.
- using a quotation that pertains to your topic.
- defining a key term you use throughout your essay.

body paragraphs. A body paragraph should begin with a topic sentence, a statement that contains the main idea of the paragraph. A body paragraph should contain specific, concrete details that support the topic sentence, which may include reasons, examples, names, numbers, and senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch). The goal of a body paragraph is coherence. A paragraph is coherent when its sentences are connected in content and relate to each other in form and language.

concluding paragraph. The concluding paragraph is the ending of the entire essay. In your conclusion, you need to provide a sense of completion. Your conclusion should follow logically from your thesis statement and body paragraphs. Your conclusion should also:

- ask your reader for awareness, action, or a similar outcome.
- project into the future.
- summarize the main points of your essay.